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ABSTRACT

Canada's National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) develops innovative partnerships to involve voluntary and national organizations, governments, business, and labor in a national effort to make Canada a more literate society. The two main objectives of the NLS are to promote a variety of opportunities for people to improve their reading and writing skills and to make Canada's social, economic, and political life more accessible to people with weak literacy skills. Through its work with Canada's provinces and territories, the NLS has been able to set a national direction for literacy programs, meet local and regional needs in projects addressing national literacy objectives, and support projects with the following objectives: research literacy issues, increase public awareness about literacy, develop new learning materials, broaden the range of Canadians receiving literacy training, and coordinate and share information among groups involved in literacy. NLS partnerships have resulted in literacy programs for young offenders and ex-offenders, persons with disabilities, women, Canada's aboriginal people, and members of ethnocultural communities. NLS partnerships have also resulted in workplace and family literacy programs. NLS defines its success by the quality of its partnerships and works with organizations in all sectors to make plain language the standard for communications. (MN)

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READING THE FUTURE

**NLS Partnerships
help Canadians meet the Challenges
of a Changing World**

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PARTNERSHIPS

The National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) develops innovative partnerships to involve voluntary and national organizations, governments, business and labour in a national effort to make Canada a more literate society. The NLS has two main objectives:

- ▶ to promote a variety of opportunities for people to improve their reading and writing skills and
- ▶ to make Canada's social, economic and political life more accessible to people with weak literacy skills.

Through its work with the provinces and territories, the NLS has been able to meet local and regional needs in projects that address the national objectives. The NLS sets a national direction for literacy programs, but it is not involved in teaching reading and writing skills directly to Canadians. That work is done by the provinces, through the education system, and by voluntary groups, literacy organizations and labour and other groups that have developed expertise in the area. Projects supported by the NLS:

- ▶ research literacy issues;
- ▶ increase public awareness about literacy;
- ▶ develop new learning materials that meet learners' needs;
- ▶ broaden the range of Canadians who take literacy training; and
- ▶ co-ordinate and share information among groups involved in literacy.

Canadian literacy organizations are working with organizations in all sectors to promote literacy. Organizations such as the Movement for Canadian Literacy, Frontier College, Laubach Literacy of Canada and the Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français are forming new partnerships with NLS support.

Projects funded by the NLS have enabled Canadians to improve their literacy skills in all stages of life: Family literacy programs use a variety of approaches to give parents and children opportunities to strengthen their literacy skills; workplace literacy training lets workers improve their reading and writing skills and learn other important skills; new teaching programs, developed in partnership with ethno-cultural groups and seniors' groups, are sensitive to cultural and other factors that can influence how people learn; and innovative teaching methods and resources designed by and for persons with disabilities have opened up training opportunities.

Making ours a more literate society helps improve the quality of Canadians' lives and our standard of living. The National Literacy Program recognizes that learning begins early in life and must continue throughout life, that by continuously improving our skills we can have economic security in the face of changing technologies and jobs. This investment is a key to ensuring that all Canadians can take part in our country's social, economic and political life.

Literacy is good business

The NLS works in partnership with the business sector to offer literacy training to Canadian workers. With NLS support, the ABC Canada Foundation, a non-profit organization that raises public awareness about literacy, has been able to advise the private sector about workplace literacy. Businesses have also contributed resources and expertise to the national literacy effort. An ABC partnership with Teledirect, for example, has made it easier for people to find out about literacy programs: Yellow Pages directories are listing literacy programs and services under the heading *Learn*.

The NLS has helped bring literacy training to the job site. Canadian corporations and unions recognize that technology and other changes in the workplace are making greater literacy demands on workers. So workers have to have basic literacy skills and be able and willing to improve their skills through learning opportunities on the job. Some companies are offering employees paid time-off for literacy courses; business and labour are training skilled workers to teach their co-workers. The approaches to literacy training taken in Canadian workplaces reflect the variety of industries that have made literacy a priority.

When the workplace isn't in one place

Workplace literacy projects must respond to the needs of workers with different backgrounds wherever they work. In Newfoundland, the Atlantic Labourers' International Rehabilitation and Training Trust Fund collected training videos that workers can watch at home. This joint labour-management group also set up study circles for workers in outlying communities and gave them an 800 number to call for support. The Trust Fund's van even travels out to construction sites to provide training. In New Brunswick, the Retail Gasoline Dealers' Association handled a similar challenge of training workers in widely scattered locations by developing a curriculum and training local literacy groups throughout the province to deliver the program.

Literacy training can lead to other skills

Literacy training can give workers an opportunity to upgrade their skills in other areas as well. The NLS supported a partnership among the Yukon Literacy Council, the territorial Motor Vehicles Branch and Yukon College to develop three handbooks on land surveying and an air brake manual for use by learners.

Literacy "brokers"

In some areas of the country the training opportunities are there, but the people, resources and organizations involved in literacy training need to be brought together. In Manitoba, a joint labour-business committee acts as a broker to bring funders and trainers together and get the necessary learning tools for workplace literacy training. Similar efforts have been made in Nova Scotia, Quebec's Eastern Townships, and New Brunswick. And an NLS partnership with the province of Alberta led to the publication of a booklet called *Keeping Alberta Competitive*, which presents a model of a workplace literacy program.

Labour organizations are getting information about literacy programs out to their local leaders. The Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec, for example, has created a model workplace training program for workers. The kit includes learning materials geared to the workplace and a guide for facilitators that lists resource people. The Canadian Federation of Labour (CFL) has developed a "tool kit" to help local labour leaders brief their members and employers about literacy. The kit contains information about literacy and audio-cassettes of interviews with labour leaders. Some of the CFL's affiliates have launched workplace literacy projects with the help of the kit.

Partnerships bring new approaches to literacy training for more people

Partnerships with organizations that are not usually involved in literacy issues have opened up training opportunities to people who otherwise may not seek to improve their skills. The NLS has enabled the Salvation Army, for example, to pilot training programs for people who may have given up on learning. People who use the Salvation Army's services might not look for a literacy program on their own, but they can now get this training from an organization and people they know and trust. The street-smart teachers give the students a sense of pride and accomplishment that encourages them to complete their program.

Young offenders and ex-offenders

Literacy training can enable people to change their lives. For inmates and ex-offenders, the training can help them get a new start. In Ontario, the NLS helped the Ministries of Education and Correctional Services build partnerships to bring literacy training to offenders and ex-offenders. The effort involved workers in correctional institutions, educators and probation and parole officers in a number of communities. And in eastern Canada, the John Howard Society worked with the Prince Edward Island Youth Centre to develop and test a literacy program using computers, for young offenders. This NLS-sponsored partnership also got support from the provincial government and other federal departments.

Persons with disabilities

Persons with disabilities can face a number of challenges in having their literacy needs met. With NLS support, organizations are developing partnerships to improve access to training and to community services. Some innovative literacy training programs are available, but instructors must learn how to use them. In British Columbia, a unique partnership among Capilano College, the Neil Squire Foundation, Digital Equipment Canada Ltd. and the Provincial Curriculum Development Centre led to two-day workshops to teach educators how to administer a literacy training program for students with severe physical disabilities. Instructors in 14 colleges learned how to use Speech-Assisted Reading and Writing (SARAW) computer stations. These talking computers enable persons who do not speak, and others, to operate the computer program.

People First of Canada developed links between people who teach literacy skills and people who have been labelled mentally handicapped in communities across Canada. And the Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres received NLS support to help Canadian communities respond to the literacy needs of persons with disabilities.

Women

While the ability to read and write well is an important need for all Canadians, many women cannot take courses to improve their literacy skills because they cannot afford transportation or child care. So the NLS helps organizations to meet these needs in their literacy programs. Literacy groups are also developing learning materials that relate to women's lives and training materials for tutors. The information for tutors helps them avoid learning materials that present negative images of women and lets tutors know how to refer women who disclose problems of abuse or incest to community resources that can help.

The Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women has set up 12 pilot projects that give women a positive learning environment. The Congress will study the results of these projects and promote the successful learning models across the country.

Canada's aboriginal people

Literacy training programs in aboriginal communities across Canada have brought added benefits, such as developing a stronger sense of community and culture. In Port Hardy, British Columbia, for example, the GWA'SALA-NAKWAX DA'XW (We Have An Understanding) Council worked with North Island College in an NLS-sponsored project to build literacy skills while documenting the band's history. Young mothers were paired with women elders to record their personal stories and teachings. While the young women improved their literacy skills, the whole community became interested and got involved in the project.

In northern Quebec, the Fédération des co-opératives du Nouveau Québec began developing literacy projects for Inuit employees working in 12 cooperatives. The Fédération is assessing the workers' training needs and producing a guide, written in plain language, to the training resources that are available for literacy programs. New programs are also being developed to meet the needs of aboriginal communities. In the Northwest Territories, Arctic College developed training strategies and materials teaching literacy skills in English and aboriginal languages, for people in 33 communities.

The Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies developed a literacy action plan for bands and aboriginal communities across the country. The Institute consulted with aboriginal organizations to make sure that the plan reflects the real needs and concerns that must be and are being addressed in literacy training efforts by and for aboriginal people.

Members of ethno-cultural communities

People learn best when teaching materials present new information in a familiar context. So members of ethno-cultural communities and a number of organizations across the country are working to develop literacy training materials and teaching methods that relate to the experiences of the Canadians they represent. The Nova Scotia Community College, for example, has assessed the literacy training needs of African Canadians in Nova Scotia and looked at problems they face in joining programs, training instructors and developing new materials.

Children learn at home too

While many NLS partnerships focus on the needs of adult learners, children also need support to build their reading and writing skills in activities outside the classroom. Because children who read at home become more skilled readers, NLS partnerships encourage family literacy programs. On the national level, for example, the Canadian Home and School and Parent-Teacher Federation is getting literacy materials to parents in ethno-cultural communities so they can help their children read in English or French.

In Manitoba, the Reading Partners/Bookmates program encourages parents to read to their children and teach them to use the library; the Born to Read program encourages new mothers to read to their young children. In Ontario, the Kingston Literacy program has developed family literacy kits for distribution in schools. It tested the kits with literacy teachers and wrote a handbook to guide teachers using the kits.

Improving access through better communication

While Canadians improve their literacy skills, we also need to make sure that people with weak literacy skills are not cut off from our social, economic and political life. One way to do this is by communicating in ways that are easy to understand. The 1989 Statistics Canada survey of Canadians' literacy skills showed that 38 percent of us have some difficulty with everyday reading materials. We can improve this statistic by giving more Canadians access to literacy training; we can also try to make our everyday reading materials clearer. A Decima survey showed that most Canadians think that information about government programs, for example, is too hard to understand.

The NLS brought together people from fourteen federal departments and agencies to find a way to help public servants improve government communications. They produced two guides, entitled *Plain Language: Clear and Simple* and *Pour un style clair et simple*. The guides, which are available in print, braille or audio-cassette, offer practical tips on how to write complicated information in plain language. The two books have become national bestsellers, with 25,000 copies sold after only two years.

The NLS has also set up partnerships with organizations outside government to encourage others to adopt plain language practices. The Canadian Bar Association, the Canadian Public Health Association and the United Way have included plain language in their literacy activities.

Researching literacy and building public awareness

As a follow-up to the 1989 literacy survey, Statistics Canada is preparing for an international survey of adults to find out about their attitudes toward literacy and learning and to find out if Canadians' literacy skills have improved in the early nineties. Canada will be joining with the United States, Mexico, Ireland, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland and Taiwan to conduct the survey in 1994. The NLS will give financial support to the project.

The NLS has also supported the founding of the International Award for Best Research in Literacy. The award seeks to encourage new research on literacy issues and is administered by the UNESCO Institute for Education.

Awareness can lead to action

The NLS helped make Canadians aware of the results of the 1989 literacy survey and keeps Canadians informed about developments in literacy. It does not support promotional activities for their own sake; its partnerships to promote literacy issues have sought to involve Canadians in actions that will help improve our skills. Through the Performers for Literacy program, for example, ACTRA members make public appearances in support of literacy activities and video and print materials are developed to encourage Canadians to read and write.

The Canadian Teachers' Federation, the Toronto Blue Jays and the Montreal Expos are partners with the NLS in a literacy promotional program. The "Hit the Books - There is no off season for learning" promotional campaign promotes reading among the five-million children in 16,000 public schools across the country. Players donate their time to deliver pro-literacy messages at public appearances and through quotes printed on bookmarks and posters. Frontier College is taking a similar approach to developing television ads in which members of the NHL Players Association promote reading.

No one can do it all alone

The work of the National Literacy Secretariat helps involve many sectors of the Canadian community in literacy activities. Each organization and group of individuals brings a unique and critical set of skills that help improve Canada's literacy outlook:

- ▶ **Literacy organizations** provide the essential training and guide others who want to be involved.
- ▶ **Schools** reach out to welcome learners who may not have had access to literacy training in the past.
- ▶ **Voluntary and national groups** representing seniors, members of ethno-cultural communities, persons with disabilities, and women help ensure that the people they represent are part of the mainstream in literacy training.
- ▶ **Unions, professional associations and businesses** bring literacy training into the workplace and address literacy concerns in everyday work.

And Canadians everywhere are working to make plain language the standard for communications.

The key to successful partnerships is in bringing together organizations and groups that can benefit from each other's experience and expertise. Through NLS partnerships, schools

are working with unions, businesses are working with voluntary organizations, and literacy groups are working with organizations in all sectors.

The NLS defines its success by the quality of its partnerships. We can do our best to improve Canadians' literacy skills if we work together. Canadians' literacy skills will, after all, help to shape our future.